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THE CALL OF YOUTH''

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“THE CALL OF YOUTH”

Novelized by Robert Sneddon. From Hugh Ford's
Paramount Picture,

“THE CALL OF YOUTH,”

Adapted from Henry Arthur Jones' play, “JAMES, THE FOGY”

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“OH!” exclaimed Betty Overton, stumbling on the smooth stones. “Why didn’t I go round by the bridge instead of trying to cross this old stream. Bother!”

With rueful eyes she watched the high-heeled shoe, which had at that moment slipped from her foot, spin in the rushing water, and hasten off on a voyage of exploration.

Mr. Hubert Richmond, who had been standing on the bridge, moodily contemplating the water beneath, as if to gain inspiration for some method by which his fortunes might be retrieved from the mess in which they had been left by his father’s death, sighed and shook his head. A walking tour was all very well for one’s health and enjoyment, but not exactly the best way to attain fame and fortune. No argosy floated on that tide, that was one thing sure.

Suddenly he started.

“Good Lord! What on earth! By all that’s wonderful—a girl’s shoe. Talk about my ship coming to port! This looks like a positive answer.”

And all unthinking that often a trivial thing, floating into the current of life, will change its course, he leaned over and fished out the shoe with his walking stick.

As he held it in his hand, with a half-amused expression, he said to himself:

“If whoever owns this corresponds to the shoe, then she’s a darling. Funniest thing I ever knew happen. And there she is—Cinderella herself. Jove! She is pretty. In trouble, too, poor thing.”

Slipping the shoe into his pocket, he scrambled down to the bank, and walked along to where Betty was standing disconsolately on the stone in midstream.

“Can’t I help you?” he asked, lifting his cap.

PZ 3
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She looked at him in surprise, and tried to hide her shoeless foot behind the other.

"I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance," she said coldly. "Oh, dear!"

The treacherous stone betrayed her again as she balanced perilously.

"Take my hand. Bother ceremony!" Hubert suggested.

She stretched out her hand unwillingly, lurched forward with a gasp, and her rescuer, with a grin, received her into his arms and without a word carried her to the bank.

"Awfully sorry," he apologized, "but the water is rather wet to-day. Personally I'd hate to sit down in it."

He paused and drew back as she looked at him witheringly, turned her back and started to limp away.

"Oh, I say," he said, smiling. "Pardon me, but haven't you lost something?"

He held out the fatal shoe.

Betty turned and put out her hand.

"No. Can't be done," he assured her teasingly. "I'm sorry, but tradition says this is the proper way to do it, Cinderella."

He dropped to his knee and extended the shoe invitingly.

Its owner started back indignantly, then her cheeks dimpled in a forgiving smile and she put out her silk-clad foot. Very gravely he fitted the shoe to it and rose.

"Oh, thank you so much," she said shyly.

"Not at all. Jolly glad I was on the spot. I'm not usually so lucky."

A sudden constraint fell upon them, and she walked away.

He stood for an instant looking after her, then turned and walked back to the bridge very thoughtfully.

As Betty reached the bushes a little way off another girl came out through them with twinkling eyes.

"Well," she said, "who is Prince Charming? I was just in time to see that pretty little scene."

Betty blushed.

"I don't know, Joan. I lost my old shoe in the stream, and he fished it out for me."

A masculine voice bellowed somewhere:

"Joan! Betty! Come on. I've got the picnic things packed. Time to make for home."

"Peter in a hurry as usual," said Joan Lawton, Betty's cousin. "You'd think I was his wife already the way he gives me orders."

"His wife?"

MS 26 Apr. 1913
"Sh!" said Joan warningly. "I think he's dying to propose to me, the poor thing, but he hasn't plucked up courage yet. Come along then."

Mr. Mark Lawton sat in the library of Lawton Manor, stony despair written on his face. As the door opened he turned his head quickly.

"That you, dear?"

"Yes." Mrs. Lawton stopped. "Why—is anything wrong? You're worrying, dear. Some trouble you've been hiding from me. What is it?"

He hesitated, then threw out his hands.

"I'm wiped out. The bottom fell out of Java stocks. Agar's combine has wiped me out."

"James Agar! Oh, my dear!"

"Yes, a hard man. If I could only induce him to delay settlement; a little time might save me."

Mrs. Lawton looked away, then said softly:

"Mr. Agar may be reasonable. His visits here—and then his attentions to the girls—"

He looked up, startled.

"You mean he may be in love with Joan?"

"I hope so. He's a splendid match."

He shook his head.

"We mustn't build on that, not unless Joan cares to. Hush, isn't that the car at the door now? We mustn't spoil Betty's birthday. The presents are in the drawing-room. We'd better go there."

Betty paused at the drawing-room door, then ran forward with sparkling eyes.

"Oh, how lovely!" she said impulsively. "That darling bracelet and that perfectly ducky chain! I've got just the best aunt and uncle in the world."

Kissing her aunt warmly, she ran to her uncle.

"I wish I were a boy so I could make my fortune and give it all to you, you dear, dear thing!"

Mark Lawton smiled a little sadly, then patted the cheek which lay against his.

"I'm quite content with you as you are, my dear. Where's Joan?"

"Oh, she? She must have gone out with auntie for something."

In her room Mrs. Lawton was just beginning a maternal exhortation to duty with these ominous words:

"I want to talk to you about Mr. Agar, Joan, dear."

That night, in the girls' cozy boudoir, where silence and the brightly burning fire seemed to coax confidences, Joan had just finished her story.

"Poor daddy! I suppose it's my bounden duty to marry old James the Foggy—and save the family—just like a novel."

"Oh, but you never could, Joan! What would happen to Peter?"

Joan looked away and sighed.

"If he'd only have fallen in love with me," continued Betty, staring into the glowing embers, "I could pay back all the love uncle and auntie have lavished on me here, for my home, my frocks, my education. I owe them so much. They've been so wonderful, so kind. You know, it's always so romantic to sacrifice one's self."

"You've never been in love, Betty," said Joan with a little choke in her voice. "I think I'll go to bed now. Oh, dear, oh, dear, why are things so difficult?"

Mr. James Agar, sitting in the gloomy library of his gloomy mansion in Park Lane, London's Fifth Avenue, stroked his dog's ears and scowled at the fire.

"All very well for you, old fellow," he said despondently. "Little you care so long as you have a good bed and a bone and some one to pull your ears and say, 'Good Don!' But who cares for your master? I wonder if I have a real friend in the world. Plenty of people toady to me for my money and envy me, too. But friends! Bah! My life is like this gloomy house—an empty shell. I believe Mark Lawton, beggared, is happier to-night than I am. A wife, a daughter, and Betty! Lucky dog! Betty alone could make me the happiest man in the world. Forty-odd as I am, I'll risk it, Don. I'll write to Mrs. Lawton to-night, and ask if I may speak to Betty—little Betty. You'd love her, Don."

"Oh, auntie!"

Betty looked with dazed eyes at her aunt as she handed back the letter which had come that morning.

"What am I to do, auntie?"

"You must do what you think best, dear. Mr. Agar is immensely rich, a man of the world. He can give you everything, but you must decide for yourself."

"If I—if I," faltered Betty. "I mean, do you think Mr. Agar might help uncle if I were to marry him?"

"Oh, my dear," said Mrs. Lawton. "You mustn't let that make any difference. Of course, I suppose it might. Still, you are free to do as you please, Betty. Now I must go and see your uncle."

"But, my dear," said Mr. Lawton, "this is very wonderful, our little Betty. Only Agar's too old for her."

"Many a girl's been happy with a middle-aged husband. Besides it may assure our future. He will not press his claim on you; he can't decently do that."

Her husband hesitated weakly.

"Very well, my dear, as you think best. Only let her decide for herself. She mustn't be swayed by any thought of us."

"Leave it to me. He's a remarkable man, and she's very impressionable. Besides there is no one else—no other man."

"Agar's driving down to-day, the letter said."

"Yes."

"Then he may be here any moment."

"I suppose so. Isn't that a car now? I will send him in here first and see that you make the best of your time."

"Mr. Agar, ma'am!"

"Very well."

She followed the servant.

"How do you do, Mr. Agar?"

"How do you do my dear Mrs. Lawton? You received my letter?"

"Yes, but of course the matter rests with Betty. Won't you go in and see my husband? He is rather anxious to see you."

Agar smiled grimly and nodded.

"I really am not an ogre," he said with heavy playfulness.

The door shut upon the two men. Mrs. Lawton paused a moment, then with a relieved expression hurried away to Betty.

"Will you go down to the drawing-room, Betty? Mr. Agar will join you in a minute or so. We are leaving it all in your hands, dear," she added meaningly. And Betty understood. Her future life had already been decided for her.

Her heart throbbed as she stood in the drawing-room. At last the door opened and Mr. Agar appeared, smiling.

"Miss Overton, I'm delighted to see you, but you look anxious. It's all right; you're not to worry about your uncle's affairs. We have arranged things, and greatly to his advantage."

"We must be very grateful to you," she murmured. "We're all very grateful."

"That's very nice and I appreciate it, but it was a very simple matter, not such a terrible problem as another I'm going to tell you about. I wonder if you recognize this." He drew a long glove from his pocket. "You lost it a month ago, and I found it, and ever since then it has been before me, recalling you to my mind, and I have a very busy mind, but always you——"

Betty listened, carried away by his strength, his domination.

"My dear," he concluded, "could you care enough to marry an old foggy like me?"

He took her hands and looked into her eyes ardently.

"You've been so good," she faltered.

"Then it is—Yes."

The answer slipped from her lips.

"Yes!"

He took her in his arms and reverently kissed her forehead.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! And I have to go away at the moment of my greatest happiness. I will be away on a fortnight's business trip. But my new happiness will go with me for company."

Betty saw his car drive off. As it did so Peter appeared on the drive on horseback and with him another—a man, also riding—the man who had recovered her shoe for her. She saw Joan below, talking with them. She waved to Betty and shouted something, and Betty, leaning out, met the eyes of Hubert. He said gayly:

"I had no idea my old pal Peter knew you. Aren't you coming for a ride, Miss Overton?"

A fortnight passed in which youth heard the call of youth; the acquaintance so strangely begun ripened to friendship, and beyond.

Agar hastened down to Lawton Manor, and, hearing Betty was in the grounds, went to greet her. He was just in time to see her break away from a young man with these words:

"No! No! I am engaged."

Like a wild creature she took to her heels, and Agar, recovering his composure, came forward sternly. Hubert turned defiantly, then smiled in recognition.

"Why, it's father's friend, Mr. Agar."

"Yes, and you're Hubert Richmond. I thought you had left England after his death."

"I found there were debts, and I came back to try and clear them off."

"Quite so. I interrupted you, I'm afraid. When I came up just now, I couldn't help overhearing Miss Overton say she was engaged. She has promised to marry me."

"You?"

"Yes."

"Oh!"

"Are you doing anything at present?"

"No."

"Call at my office to-morrow. I may have something to interest you."

Hubert hesitated.

"Very well. Thanks. I'll come!"

"To-morrow, then. I'm going back to town at once. I'm afraid I won't see Miss Overton before I leave."

It seemed to Hubert as he sat in James Agar's office next day that the conversation had continued without a break, for he had spent the night trying to face the realization that the girl he loved was about to marry another. What was Agar saying now? He stiffened to attention.

"I can place you with an expedition to Africa in which I am interested. It will pay you very well—six hundred pounds a year and all found."

"I must confess I wasn't thinking of leaving England just now."

"Too bad! Central Africa has its opportunities, and I'll settle your debts before you go."

"Why?" asked Hubert bluntly.

"Your father was my old business associate. I'd gladly help his son. Well, you don't answer. Don't you care to go? Might I ask why not?"

"Because I love Betty Overton."

"And Miss Overton? Has she given you any encouragement?"

"Not in words, but——"

"She is engaged to me. Our ideas of honor apparently do not agree."

"She doesn't love you. It would be different if she did."

"Stop! What can your selfish love do for her? Drag her down to wretchedness and poverty! My love can safeguard her future and cherish her dear ones. Can yours do that? Come," he added persuasively. "If your love is real and unselfish, accept my offer. It's her chance in life, and I'm offering you yours. You're young yet, the world is open to you, a man strong to conquer if you will only grasp your opportunity."

The torrent of his arguments thundered in the ears of Hubert.

"Very well," he gasped at last. "I'm beaten."

"No, you have conquered yourself—quite a difference. You will leave to-morrow and join the party at Southhampton. Just wait in that room there while I arrange the matter."

As he went out with bowed head, Agar picked up a letter from Michaelson, doctor of the expedition.

"I can't get a man for the Nargau district; they're all afraid of the fever. It means sure death for all but the most robust."

Agar laid it down, paused, then with an air of decision drew a telegram form to him.

"Expect Hubert Richmond join party to-morrow. Strong, healthy, fancy just the man for Nargau district."

The two who had suddenly found their happiness turn to bitterness looked into each other's eyes for the last time that afternoon in the wood at Lawton Manor.

"Then it's good-by, Betty, forever."

"And forever!"

"I won't go. I'll stay, and tell——"

"No. I've given my word. You must go for my sake."

"Betty!"

"For my sake, Hubert."

"Good-by, my darling! Good-by! I'll be thinking of you every minute."

"And I, too. No, please! Good-by!"

The weary months rolled on. On the eve of the wedding Agar brought to his bride-to-be a necklace of pearls, for which his agents had ransacked all Europe.

As he clasped it round her neck, her proximity and his own long-contained passion overcame him, and, catching her to him, he kissed her again and again. Maddened by the shudder which ran through her, the brute in him leaped to the surface, and he forced her to accept his kisses until, terrified, she wrenched herself away.

Into her own room she ran distraught and tore off the necklace. As she looked for a handkerchief to erase those hateful kisses, a photograph fell out, and, meeting the eyes of Hubert looking into hers, she fell on her knees by her bedside. In her despair it seemed almost as if she could hear the voice of the man who loved her calling from afar, from the jungles of Africa. She could almost imagine that he was near her in her agony, yet that strangely enough he needed her even more than she needed him.

And at that very moment Hubert, tossing on a bed of fever, was calling aloud:

"Betty! Betty! Come to me, Betty!"

The lurking shadow of fate drew back from the door of the hut. Another phantom shape had passed into the hut.

"Betty!" cried Hubert in his delirium. "Betty, you heard me. You've come!"

A gentle breeze fanned his brow. It seemed to him that he heard the soft, caressing murmur of a well-remembered voice telling him to sleep, all was well.

Half an hour later Doctor Michaelson, coming in wearily, looked at the still figure.

"Poor fellow! Good thing he has no wife at home. Agar must have got my cable by now. I'd best send him another confirming."

He stooped, and emitted a startled exclamation.

"Sleeping—the unexpected has happened. He'll live. I'll get a cable to Agar at once."

In a room by himself Agar reviewed his life. Ruthless he had been, but honest according to his own lights. That which he had

desired he had taken. No man had ever been allowed to stand in his path. But to-night? A barrier had erected itself which, man of power as he was, he could not destroy. Terror, fear, shrinking; he had seen all these things in Betty's eyes. Even now she was lying sick. He had heard her cry aloud, "Hubert! Hubert!" before she fell to the floor insensible.

He looked at the cable he held in his hand, rose, and stood staring at the floor, where in imagination he saw the ruins of the castle of his dreams. He could never build it into strength again, but—he started with beads of moisture on his brow—he might make of these fragments a humbler lodging for others—a lodge in the wilderness.

Suddenly he snapped his jaw, his decision made. Youth had called to youth. It must be answered, cost what it might.

He squared his shoulders, and with his old strength went out to where the Lawtons were sitting.

"Tell Betty," he said quietly, "that it's all right. Tell her to be patient. I'm going out to Africa on the first boat, and I will bring back Hubert just as soon as human agency can accomplish it. Just say that—and that I'm sorry I can't say good-by. She was very kind to an old foggy—it was foolish of him to think it would last forever. Good-night!"

THE END

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